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The Fantastic in the Family Sagas: Implications for Saga Authorship

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(Menntaskólinn í Kópavogi / Háskóli Íslands)

There is increasing acceptance that characterisation in the family sagas is complex enough to include the subtle incorporation of protagonists' inner lives. Thus, despite saga authors' apparent desire to pass on traditional stories, saga characterization brings with it the possibility of a connection between the medieval author and the early Icelandic community represented in the sagas, a break in the saga code of objective narration that adds further weight to recent arguments that saga authorship was conceived in broader terms than merely the preservation of oral tales. One such break in objectivity occurs in the range of responses to the fantastic, when characters are forced to interpret the supernatural or strange events in their lives. At such times, the author allows glimpses of the inner lives of characters, focussing our attention on the way in which characters perceived and dealt with extraordinary occurrences, but also highlighting and thematising the distinctive social context of the early Icelandic community.

Brennu-Njáls saga

One of the more exceptional characters in *Brennu-Njáls saga* is Hrútr Herjólfsson, the dominant figure in the opening part of the saga. Hrútr is a perceptive individual, his skills of observation and understanding themselves bordering on the fantastic. When his brother Höskuldr presents Hallgerðr for approval, Hrútr perceives and comments on her nature, not necessarily predicting that she will steal but certainly spotting the tendency. When Höskuldr points out Unnr for approval, Hrútr is once again wiser than his brother and rightly questions whether he and Unnr could ever be happy together. Hrútr is no less brilliant in Norway, where he demonstrates his wisdom and discernment by gratifying Gunnhildr's sexual desires – he is wise enough to know not to contradict the Queen. Hrútr meets her suggestion that they sleep together with a simple acknowledgment of her power: *Þér skuluð slíka ráða* (15). And she expects no less than that he will accept her help: *Slíks var ván, því at Hrútr er vitr maðr og vel at sér* (13). The two have recognised each others' dispositions, a skill that appears to be of special interest to the author and is becoming thematised in Hrútr's exercise of it.

Hrútr's intelligence is represented as the ability to understand other characters and the situations to which their dispositions lead. He has seen that he does not have any choice in his relationship with the Queen, and before he is in Norway he has observed that he and Unnr are not suited. He also understands that these relationships will converge in an unpleasant way when it comes to the time to return from Norway and fulfil his obligation to marry in Iceland. Gunnhildr, as astute now as she was when Hrútr arrived, interprets his departure as a sexual challenge of an indistinct kind: she seems to sense the presence of another woman. Hrútr, for his part, betrays his unease and foresight when, in reply to Gunnhildr's suspicion, he lies:

‘Ert þú hugsjúkr, Hrútr?’ sagði hon. ‘Þat er sem mælt er,’ segir Hrútr, ‘at illt er þeim, er á ólandi er alinn.’ ‘Villt þú til Íslands?’ segir hon. ‘Þat vil ek,’ sagði hann. ‘Átt þú konu nökkura út þar?’ segir hon. ‘Eigi er þat,’ sagði hann. ‘Þat hefi ek þó fyrir satt,’ segir hon. Síðan hættu þau talinu. (20)

When it is time to depart, the Queen draws Hrútr aside to give him parting gifts:

‘Hér er gullhringr, er ek vil gefa þér’ – ok spennti á hönd honum. ‘Marga gjöf góða hefi ek af þér þegit,’ segir Hrútr. Hon tók hendinni um háls honum ok kyssti hann ok mælti: ‘Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn aðrar konur. Ok hefir nú hvárki okkat vel: þú trúðir mér eigi til málsins.’ Hrútr hló at ok gekk í braut. (20-21)

Hrútr’s laughter at this point may reasonably be interpreted as expressing grim humour, defiance of the Queen, or an heroic indifference to the course of fate, but not I think a disbelief in Gunnhildr’s power or the likelihood that the spell will work. After all, Hrútr has himself predicted that his marriage with Unnr will not succeed and he has recognised Gunnhildr’s contributions to his success – earlier, when Úlfr teases him about the help the Queen has given him, Hrútr does not contradict the implication of some kind of supernatural force at work, but simply allows the insult to be avenged by the spear that is heading in Úlfr’s direction. Even in the parting scene, Hrútr makes an enigmatic reference to the Queen’s gifts, again acknowledging her power in his life. In all, Hrútr’s laughter seems an expression of a highly perceptive character’s piecing together of observations he has made leading up to this moment.

Attributing such perceptiveness and understanding to Hrútr is an important element in his success as a sympathetic character, because it contrasts sharply with the lack of perception shown by Hrútr’s eventual opponents, his wife, Unnr, and her father, Mörðr. Neither is credited with understanding the source of the problem that has arisen between the married couple: Unnr, though eloquent and dignified in her description of Hrútr’s sexual problem, is at a loss as to its cause or resolution, while Mörðr, a lawyer to the end, pursues a legal solution to a matter that is not easily contained by the law:

‘Hvat segir þú mér frá Hrúti, féлага þínum?’ Hon svarar: ‘Gott má ek frá honum segja þat allt, er honum er sjálfrátt.’ Mörðr varð hljóðr við. ‘Hvat býr þér í skapi, dóttir?’ segir hann, ‘því at ek sé, at þú villt, at engi viti nema ek, ok munt þú trúa mér beztt til órráða um þitt mál.’ Þá gengu þau á tal, þar er engir menn heyrðu þeira viðræði...’ Ek vilda segja skilit við Hrút, ok má ek segja þér, hverja sök ek má helzt gefa honum. Hann má ekki hjúskaparfar eiga við mik, svá at ek mega njóta hans, en hann er at allri náttúru sinni annarri sem inir vöskustu menn...Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hörund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik, en þó höfum vit bæði breytni til þess á alla vega, at vit mættim njótask, en þat verðr ekki. En þó áðr vit skilim, sýnir hann þat af sér, at hann er í æði sínu rétt sem aðrir menn.’ (24)

Gunnhildr’s spell not only reflects her jealousy and Hrútr’s infidelity, but becomes the point where characters’ reactions are clustered for the contrast and clarification of their personalities: Hrútr’s perceptiveness and foresight lead him to be overconfident, and when Unnr claims her divorce he is taken by surprise, just as he is surprised by Njáll Page 3

and Gunnar’s eventual superiority in the case. In contrast to Hrútr’s confident inactivity, Mörðr seems over-keen to act, to pursue a legal case against Hrútr, and so comes over as painfully unaware of his limitations. His drawing-out of Unnr’s complaint reveals a parent equally concerned with the legalism for which he is famous – *engir þóttu lögligir dómar dæmðir, nema hann væri við* (5) – as with his daughter’s welfare: he encourages her speak by

recognizing her desire for confidentiality, a secrecy that will be undone by his handling of the case. Unnr herself emerges as an honourable character trapped by a difficulty she does not fully understand. Her description of Hrútr's sexual problem is erudite, making the situation clear to her father without either discrediting herself or insulting Hrútr. In each case, the characters' portrayal develops in relation to both the fantastic occurrence that they share and the social context by which it is framed, that is, the position of Icelanders at the Norwegian court and in family law.

By the close of the case, Hrútr is confirmed as an intelligent and complex character who attempts to carefully observe and understand the events in his life, not least the fantastic occurrences that result from his journey to Norway. This makes him an ideal character for an author who, in the opening part of the saga, is raising themes that will run throughout the work: sexual relations, tensions between Norwegians and Icelanders, the law's capacity to resolve disputes, and individual resolve in the face of mounting difficulties. Hrútr's interested, perceptive nature focuses the reader's engagement with the issues of his life and encourages the reader to relate Hrútr's experiences with those of later characters who share something of his perceptiveness and physical skill, most notably Njáll, Gunnar, and Flosi.

Hrútr's reaction to Gunnhildr's spell may even share something of the mood of Flosi's laughter during the settlement scene with Njáll and his sons (313); it is difficult to be precise on this point, but in both cases laughter appears to betray a mixture of resignation and defiance. The laughter of Flosi and that of Hrútr also both occur at crystallising moments of the plot, when a series of events alters from incremental developments to becoming a future that has suddenly come into view. While the audience may anticipate the events ahead (Hrútr and Unnr's divorce, the burning at Bergþórshváll), such crystallising moments remain central to a reader's feeling of tension, because it is now that the characters' sense of his or her choices is glimpsed. Despite the brevity and enigmatic nature of the responses, laughter expresses something of the characters' attitudes and feelings, in Flosi's case coming ahead of his recourse to a more clear-cut social mode of expression, the feud, with its attendant insults, immediately, of Njáll, and later blood-vengeance.

Importantly, it is the characters' perception and choice that act most powerfully to both create tension and resolution - in the above cases, resolution achieved via a grim fatalism. Hrútr and Flosi have decided to accept the course of things, and it seems to me that their laughter is not too far removed in meaning from that of a very different character who also laughs - Skarpheðinn, when he sees Sæunn beating the weeds (320). For all three characters, the narrative is crystallising for them too (and not just for the audience). We can take Einar Ól. Sveinsson's view that the author of *Brennu-Njáls saga* 'exists both inside and outside of his characters' (87) one step further to say that, at this point, the author aligns external and internal narration in a character's sudden understanding of events. This is a more hard-won understanding than the instant recognition of disposition that Hrútr has when he sees Hallgerðr, Unnr, and Gunnhildr.

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It involves a gradual awareness of how others' dispositions, the flow of events, and an understanding of one's life will become a living reality to be dealt with. The author of *Brennu-Njáls saga* was motivated by 'the desire to grapple intellectually with what the eye has seen' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 187). To do so is to build interpretive representations based on observation and perception, to link an inner dialogue with experience. In the early part of the

saga, it is Hrútr who performs this function for the author, forming a centralising world of perception through which the dramatic movement of the saga can be measured and other characters viewed.

Eyrbyggja saga

Like Hrútr, Snorri goði is an exceptional character, as much on account of his ambition as the quality of success that he enjoys and has in common with Hrútr. They have very different dispositions, though, and this is nowhere better illustrated than in their preferred methods of dispute resolution: Hrútr prefers direct confrontation, Snorri is manipulative and less physical. But Snorri's growing power as a regional leader is, on a number of occasions, tied to an ability to deal with the supernatural elements that challenge the social order on Snæfellsnes. In that respect, he outshines Hrútr, whose perceptiveness does not allow him to get the better of Gunnhildr. Snorri also outdoes the other characters of *Eyrbyggja saga*, who, like Unnr and Mörðr, have an inferior understanding of the fantastic element in their lives. As during the opening episode of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the *Eyrbyggja* author has chosen a character whose views and desires unify and contextualise events, offering the reader a dominant figure with whom to travel through early Icelandic society.

As in the case of the spell in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the Swedish berserks originate in Scandinavia and more specifically at court, and it seems to please both saga authors to explore how royal, exotic, and fantastic elements feature in the early Icelandic community. Berserks, suited to the service of kings in moments of crisis, are out of place in Iceland, where either new social codes have developed – for example, moderation, consensus, lawfulness – or paradoxically, older values have been preserved from the Norway of the time before the strengthening of royal power: stronger chieftaincies, *þing* loyalties, and anti-royalist sentiment. The arrival of berserks exemplifies the mismatch between the court and the agricultural community in Iceland. While Icelanders like Hrútr may receive favourable receptions abroad, it does not follow that they should bring court life back with them. Unwisely, Vermundr, who wants to get the better of his brother Styr, returns to Iceland with two berserks he has requested as a gift from Earl Hákon.

The author appears to relish Vermundr's stupidity in bringing the berserks to Iceland and, as in Mörðr's pursuit of Hrútr, allows the situation to develop a grim humour, in this case largely based on the transparency of Vermundr's claims to his brother's friendship, his apparent lack of self-knowledge, and in the incongruity of domestic scenes involving berserks. Vermundr tries to pass off the berserks to Styr as a reconciliation gift, a move which Styr immediately recognises as insincere:

‘Vel vil ek því taka, frændi, at batni frændsemi okkur, en þá eina frétt hefi ek til þessa manna, er þú hefir út flutt, at þat mun heldr vera vandræðatak en menn muni framkvæmð eða auðnu af þeim hljóta; nú vil ek aldri, at þeir komi í mín hýbýbil, því at ærnar eru mínar óvinsældir, þó at ek hljóta eigi vandræði af þeim.’ ‘Hvert ráð gefir þú þá til, frændi,’ segir Vermundr, ‘at ek koma þessu vandræði af mér?’ ‘Annat mál er þat,’ sagði Styr, ‘at ek leysa vandræði þitt, en hitt, at þiggja menn þessa af þér í vingjöf, ok þat vil ek eigi...’ (64)

In offering the berserks to Styrr, Vermundr breaks the promise to honour them that he made to Earl Hákon, and shows that he is not able to control forces which, like the berserks, cannot be sustained in Iceland. Earl Hákon has earlier drawn attention to the incongruity of berserks in a farming community (62), a statement that places the berserks in the realm of an older world of conflict. Our view of Vermundr suffers, because the steps he takes to even matters up with his brother express the difference between his ambition and his ability, an unflattering contrast which is made clearer when Snorri is seen to succeed not only in using the berserks' old-world strength for new-world development, but also in killing them and thus ridding the area of a kind of strength which it cannot ordinarily control. The berserks represent a dangerous re-introduction of the older, mythical world that should remain beyond the borders of a developing farming community: they are alien because their strength is too great for the models of conflict and negotiation which are coming to be established in the country.

As in the case of Gunnhildr's spell, responses to the berserks bespeak disposition, ability, and a quality of likely success or luck: Vermundr's over-reaching and subsequent regret are contrasted with Styrr's level-headedness, which in turn seems inadequate when contrasted with Snorri's cunning:

Um morguninn eptir reið Styrr inn til Helgafells. Ok er hann kom þar, bauð Snorri honum þar at vera, en Styrr kvazk tala vilja við hann ok ríða síðan. Snorri spurði, ef hann hefði nökkur vandamál at tala. 'Svá þykki mér,' segir Styrr. 'Þá skulu vit ganga upp á Helgafell; þau ráð hafa sízt at engu orðit, er þar hafa ráðin verit.' Síðan gengu þeir á fjallit upp ok sátu þar á tali allt til kvelds; vissi þat engi maðr, hvat þeir töluðu.' (71-72)

Snorri the politician is in his element here: Styrr's problems offer him a chance to cement a beneficial alliance that will increase his power in the district. Snorri's tactics are not wholly unlike Hrútr's, in that both men allow their opponents to run full steam ahead until presented with an opportune time to strike, in this case when the berserks are exhausted, in *Brennu-Njáls saga* when Hrútr can challenge Mörðr to a duel. And, as in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, only one character appears fully to perceive the whole situation and what it means for all the parties involved. But while Hrútr's intelligence lies in his perception of dispositions, Snorri is credited with greater tactical ability: looking along Snæfellsnes from his thinking spot on Helgafell, Snorri is able to narrate a likely course of events, and is unlikely ever to be shocked in the way Hrútr is when he hears of Unnr's departure.

Snorri is no less impressive in his relationship with Arnkell's father, Þórólfr. Þórólfr, who appears to represent something of the threat which the supernatural can pose to the community at large (Vésteinn Ólason, 'Máhlíðingamál' 193), is more pointedly a liability to his son and so very useful to Snorri, who can only gain from disunity within Arnkell's family. As with Mörðr's mishandling of his daughter's suit,

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Arnkell's failure with his father suggests some level of inadequacy, in this case in his pursuit of regional prominence (cf. Byock, *Medieval Iceland* 200-02). Arnkell is not in command of either the domestic or the fantastic elements in his life, while Snorri is attuned to the differences between father and son, and is able to manipulate the ethical schism to his advantage. As a result, Snorri gains more from a relationship with Þórólfr than Arnkell does: Snorri must only endure Þórólfr's complaint about the compensation paid for the slaves in

order to secure the woodlands at Krákunes. He then begins foresting heavily, probably in order to provoke Þórólfr and Arnkell and so increase the tensions between them. Shortly afterwards Þórólfr dies, still angry at his son, and although the family does its best to contain Þórólfr in a strong cairn, his angry spirit returns to remind the district of the unhappy relations between father and son.

The Fróðá marvels, which cause distress to the community, offer Snorri another opportunity to demonstrate his skills. The author has turned rather abruptly from a note about the adoption of Christianity in Iceland to the arrival in the district of the Hebridean woman Þórgunna, whose fine personal goods arouse the interest of Þuríðr and provoke from her an offer of accommodation (137-38). Þórgunna's subsequent death draws a range of responses from those at the Fróðá farm: Þuríðr's envy and view of Þórgunna's personality are expressed in her desire for the finery, while Þórrodr's lack of self-possession sees him relinquish his promise to Þórgunna rather too easily. There follows a series of deaths and hauntings, and it appears that only Kjartan is able to have some moderating effect on the fantastic events that are occurring, thus implicating Þórgunna, as she had taken a special interest in the boy. Although a younger member of the household, it is up to Kjartan to seek help, consulting his uncle, Snorri goði, who, as in the case of Styrr's difficulties, takes control from afar:

Þá var kominn prestr sá til Helgafells, er Gizurr hvíti hafði sent Snorra goða; sendi Snorri prestinn út til Fróðár með Kjartani ok Þórð kausa, son sinn, ok sex menn aðra; hann gaf þau ráð til, at brenna skyldi ársal Þórgunnu, en sækja þá menn alla í duradómi, er aptr gengu; bað prest veita tíðir, vígja vatn ok skripta mönnum. (150-51)

Snorri's advice is once again totally sound: the spirits are evicted from the farm in proper legal manner and good health returns. The intervention typifies Snorri's role in the saga as a whole. Regardless of whether it is his ill-will, ambition, or sense of kinship that motivates him, Snorri is always able to solidify his position when other characters are suffering. From the beginning of his career, when he outwits Börkr during the purchase of Helgafell, Snorri is portrayed as an exceptional opportunist, employing the people and events around him to shape the course that disputes will take and to gain accordingly. In the case of the Fróðá marvels, the civil law and Christianity best serve the purpose. Just as in 'the ghost's willingness to comply we must be seeing a model for the behaviour of the living' (Miller 229), in Snorri's planning and management of these fantastic events we witness a model politician at work.

Snorri was not a popular figure in the district. As much is revealed when the author, late in the saga, comments that Snorri became more popular as he grew older (180). But Snorri is nevertheless interesting to the author, and while he does not possess the heroic qualities of Hrútr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, or indeed of his rivals Styrr and Arnkell, Snorri does have an ability to control situations and maintain order: he is a capable leader. It is in this respect that historical theme and disposition overlap, because Snorri's ambition and tactical skill are ideal qualities around which to collect narratives of an area's transformation from a settlement society to one governed more closely by laws and regional leaders.

Eyrbyggja saga is generally regarded as a work with an antiquarian, chronicler's point of view. Guðbrandur Vigfússon, for instance, wrote of the saga's 'archaic, measured, quietly serious character' (quoted in Vésteinn Ólason, 'Máhlíðingamál' 187; cf. Guðbrandur Vigfússon 'Prolegomena' xlv), an impression assisted by the author's use of phrases like *þat váru þá lög* (56), *sem fornir menn* (72), *fornum sið* (10, 103, 122), and *sem þá var títt* (161). The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* also has the habit of connecting the events of the story to landmarks: the area of the settlement 'was later called Þórsnes' because of Þórólfr's friendship with Þórr (8), and one can still see the path built by the berserks (72). Such references look like an unblushing acknowledgement of the author's critical distance and his role as a collector of the past episodes that represent the region's history and personality.

Within a narrative framework of episodes connected as much by regional interest as theme and plot, Snorri stands out because of his success in negotiating the social and supernatural forces of early Iceland; Snorri is able to use the fantastic to benefit his standing in a wide range of other areas, from domestic to political and legal. Thus the author's representation of this period comes to be centred around Snorri's ambition in much the same way as *Brennu-Njáls saga* first raises its themes through the perceptiveness of Hrútr Herjólfsson. In both *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, the authors demonstrate a desire to connect complex characterisation with theme, and clearly one way of doing so is through the intervention of the fantastic, which can have an impact on many aspects of a character's life and so prompt a character's own interpretation of how events co-relate. The fantastic becomes a part of early Icelandic society that allows the author to investigate, in a critical manner, how early Icelanders saw their community and their part in it, allowing the saga to be a vehicle for historical understanding as well as for the preservation of historical narratives.

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